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Spring/Summer 2016



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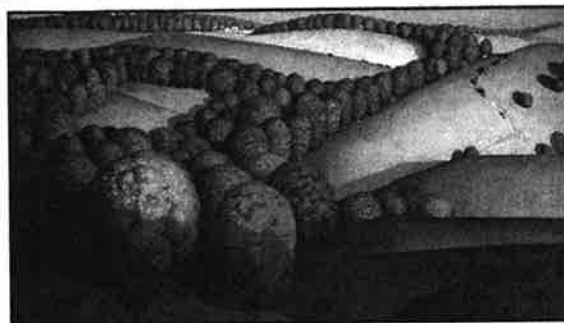
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## MORE THAN MARGINAL INTEREST— Adapting Hedgerows for Modern Landscapes

by Dave Coulter

Last summer I drove out from Chicago to central Iowa, to attend the North American Agroforestry Conference in the city of Ames. Over the past few years I have been promoting the idea of restoring the use of hedgerows in our contemporary urban and rural landscapes, and I was eager to visit with those who understood the potential values of such installations to many types of wildlife in landscapes that were otherwise devoid of such habitat.

As I made my way from the city, the scenery changed from urban to agricultural. The farmlands of Illinois and Iowa are dominated by grand vistas of corn and soybeans. Occasionally the scene along the expressways would change briefly—if I happened to pass through a city, or cross over a river valley. With the exception of these wooded watersheds, the vast majority of these areas were highly managed landscapes. I didn't start to get into more natural wooded or grassland settings until I got into the rolling hills



*Near Sundown*

*Grant Wood, 1933*

of the Mississippi River valley near my crossing at Dubuque, Iowa. I continued west, passing through iconic landscapes, one made famous by the paintings of Grant Wood.

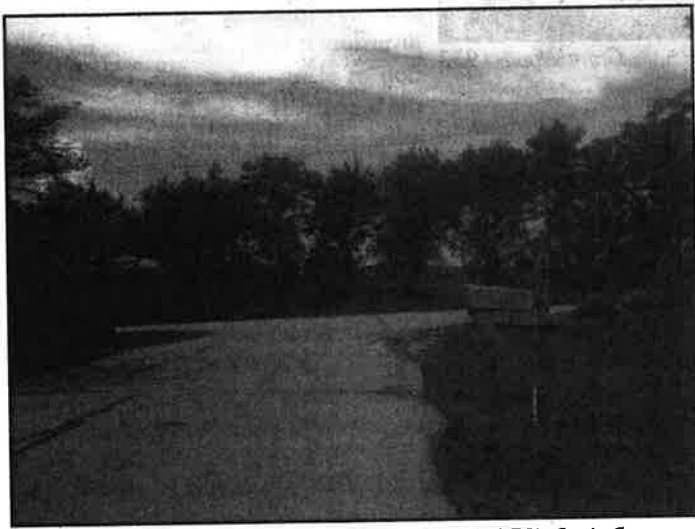
The drive gave me plenty of opportunity to survey the land, albeit at highway speeds. For a hedgerow-obsessed person such as me, this was a welcome diversion. If horticulture is the intersection of plants and people, I have spent the better part of my life using plants to make our cities and lives better. Over the course of earlier visits to England I became aware of how hedgerows have conservation benefits, offering habitat for insects, birds, and small mammals that was often prized in their intensively managed farmlands. From an historic standpoint, hedgerows were man-made, utilitarian structures that were originally designed to hold livestock or mark property boundaries. They have become harbors of biodiversity (to whatever extent they do) generally by accident. In time I linked their conservation values to the corn and soybean monocultures of the Midwest. It's ironic that Illinois is known as



## Hedgerows *continued from page 7*

the Prairie State when virtually all of the native prairies have been lost to farming and urban development.

The hedgerow era—such as it was—wasn't a long one here in the Midwest. A practice that arrived with European immigration, the hedgerow reign lasted maybe a good hundred years, marked from roughly 1800 until 1900. In response to the Dust Bowl years, hedgerows were planted as windbreaks in the Plains regions of the United States and Canada. By that time, barbed wire fence had taken over, and hedgerows were already in the process of being removed. In other cases, such as the rows of Osage-oranges that I saw in my younger years, urbanization and civilization simply built up and around them, leaving them to persist here and there as mature trees.



Remnant 19th century hedgerow (planted ca. 1870) Cook County, IL (2015).

PHOTO: DAVE COULTER

It seems to me that hedgerows—and marginal areas in general—should be better understood and appreciated. Instead of enthusiasm, the idea of hedgerows is often met with disdain. In spite of efforts to encourage rural conservation plantings, many farmers would prefer to extirpate any woody vegetation along their field margins. (And who could blame them when so many of these plants are invasive non-native species?). On another side of the environmental spectrum stand the restorationists. They may dislike hedgerows for some of the same ideas—they often contain the same invasive plants that threaten the health of the meager scraps of truly natural landscape that have persisted into modern times. So what is it about hedgerows that appeals to me—a card carrying urban horticulturist, working a long ways from farm country?

I guess it boils down my concern that in our modern world all we may have left to give back to nature are the edges. I call myself a plant person, but in truth my interest in nature goes well beyond the botanic, veering happily into the adjacent worlds of the birds, insects, and mammals that occupy all layers of the plant kingdom. (Isn't it this way with everyone when it comes to nature?). My own personal intersection of people, plants, and animals is intrigued by the hopeful possibilities that hedgerows present to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Over the past year I have conducted field surveys to sample insect and bird populations in remnant field margins and hedgerow settings in the suburbs of Chicago. In both instances there was solid evidence to suggest that such marginal settings gave harbor to higher numbers of organisms than in the adjacent landscapes. This seemed especially so among the insects that I'd sampled. This layer of life, the “non-charismatic micro-fauna” in our landscapes, anonymous to most of us, is the same sort of biodiversity that is routinely praised by scientists such as E.O. Wilson, and given full color treatment in places like National Geographic.

The plight of our pollinators (in general) and Monarch butterflies (in particular) have led to a reexamination of the biodiversity benefits that hedgerows may offer in agricultural landscapes that have been impacted by human activity. Of great interest is the research that examines the installation of native plantings, and how they may benefit a wide range of native insects and pollinators. There isn't quite yet a tidal wave of interest in hedgerow features, but perhaps it will be the fate of the Monarch that will spur the public to create more habitats that other anonymous creatures can inhabit as well. I recently saw a study that noted over 1600 different species of animals—including over 1300 insects—from a hedge in the Devon region of England (Wolton & Vergette, 2012). This is the kind of information that is starting to turn heads in North America, especially in light of pollinator decline and other concerns.

A quick survey of the overseas hedgerow world also shows great enthusiasm for the value of hedgerows as *corridors*, green byways for insects, birds and mammals to transit the countryside. Ideally—the narrative states—that these corridors will link up habitats, as well. In my early years of hedgerow obsession I found this corridor concept to be extremely seductive. Honestly, who wouldn't be turned on by the chance to create verdant green pathways where all creatures can hopscotch, Disney-esque, over the hostile landscape to islands of safety? The “corridor as a solution” idea is a popular one, especially in discussions where connecting habitats is concerned. Personally, I'm just not convinced that wildlife—no matter how good their navigation skills—will follow that row of vegetation from points A to B in the way that I drove my truck from Chicago to Ames on U.S. Highway 20.

My corridor concerns aside, the promise of hedgerows are still real. Life would certainly be easier if we could just plant something, and our bird or butterfly of choice would fly over to it—and we could all feel better. Hedgerows may not resemble the neat and tidy corridors we imagine, but they may act as niches for organisms that simply have nowhere else to go. There are any number of studies that demonstrate the habitat potential inherent in hedgerows, field margins, and the like. There is no shortage of marginal spaces hanging around the edges of modern society (rural and urban) that could be put into use for the service of nature. The primary question to ask is which nature is being served when we eagerly re-purpose such spaces. The other questions that often arise at these moments are who will pay, and then, who will maintain.

I had an instructive conversation recently with a nurseryman who is in the business of growing native plants, the type

of plants—in fact, that would make up terrific new hedgerows. One of the misgivings he raised was that of plant succession. The question of succession—or competition—is a very good one. It comes up in every perennial garden I have ever looked after, and every other sort of landscape for that matter, be it natural or artificial. We all know that in nature there are winners and losers. The sticking point that he raised was that if a palette of different plants was chosen, that over time some plants in the new hedgerow would out-compete the others. Would this leave a client feeling a bit cheated—that they had purchased more or less than perhaps they'd wound up with? The fact remains that these types of plantings will need to be maintained. This has led me to wonder if it will be only the most progressive land managers that will see the value—and find the funds for such endeavors.

Such thoughts, in these times of economic stress, can get a little discouraging, but I hope that the habitat argument will help carry the day. On top of everything else, there is genuine concern among many that we are witnessing the Holocene extinction. When I was a boy, circa 1970, in the winter we'd take our dog out to run unencumbered in the frozen farms' fields outside of town. A mix of lab and beagle, he had enough instincts to make a bee-line for the distant hedgerows where he'd roust up some Ring-necked pheasants that had been gleaning the edges for leftover crab-apples that had volunteered in the scrub. Throughout the suburbs of Chicago one could routinely hear and see pheasants in the 1970s and '80s. They're just a memory now around here, and

they seem to have gone the way of the hedgerows, the ditches, those rough marginal spaces that they used to occupy.

Hedgerows are an old idea that could be adapted for a new time in new lands. Our post-modern hedgerows could be created with sensitivity and intent. I think that, in their way, they can allow us to be better neighbors to myriad creatures, flora and fauna, that are hanging on for their lives along the edges of the numerous transitional spaces that accompany modern life. How we come to manage such areas may be one of the most important pursuits in the decades to come.

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